[Chapter] V
The Rules in the External and Internal Works of God

Scripture from time to time speaks of the one eternal essence of God, even when it speaks of Him as only one person or two persons; but sometimes it clearly shows the distinction of the persons. Therefore in order that we may maintain a definite line of reasoning, that is, the analogy of faith, we must distinguish between the statements of Holy Scripture regarding God and understand when Scripture is speaking of the unity of God and when of the Trinity of persons. Likewise, in order that we ourselves might have a definite form of speaking reverently, piously, and carefully regarding the mysteries of the Unity and the Trinity, there have been handed down in the schools two rules, taken from Augustine, which, if they have no other value, nevertheless, ought to be retained because they demonstrate the correct foundations for refuting all the arguments of the Sabellians.

I

The External Works of the Trinity are Undivided

The thrust of this rule is twofold; we divide it thus for the sake of teaching it.

1. When God outside His essence works something among His creatures, then the three persons are together and work together, because there is one doer and maker. Thus the one work is the work of the three persons. Note Martin Luther in The Last Words of David, in Vol. 8, p.164 of the Jena edition [Amer. Ed. 15.302], where he says, “If I ascribe to each Person a distinct external work in creation and exclude the other two Persons from this, then I have divided the one Godhead and have fashioned three gods or creators. And that is wrong. One must not separate the Persons with regard to the works and ascribe to each its distinct external work; but one must ... ascribe externally each work to all three without distinction ....”

Furthermore, this rule is drawn from those fundamental principles which we laid down


earlier. In creatures those things which differ in number, even if they are alike in essence, are distributed as powers and activities, as Gregory of Nazianzus says. But in God so great is the unity, so great is the power of the one and the same essence, that the individual and peculiar works which are accomplished in created beings ought not to be assigned to the individual persons. For Scripture says, “Let us make ...,” Gen. 1:26. And in John 5:19, “What the Father does, these things likewise the Son does.” John 14:10, “The Father who dwells in Me, He does the works.” And again in John 5:17, “My Father works hitherto and I work.” John 16:15, 14, “All things that the Father has are mine .... Therefore the Holy Spirit will receive of mine and will announce it to you.” These passages explain beautifully how the external works (opera ad extra) are held in common. And thus Gregory of Nazianzus can say, “That which acts is the one essence common to the three Persons.”\(^{39}\) Therefore, just as the essence is one and undivided, so the One who acts and does is one, and the work itself is one and undivided.

2. There is also this meaning for this first rule. When a comparison is made between the Deity and the creature, or between God and idols, then we must make mention of the one eternal essence. We will supply examples of this matter later on.

II

The internal works of the Trinity (opera ad intra) are divided. There is a twofold meaning also to this rule.

1. The works which God does outside of all created things, within Himself, are not common to the three persons, but are peculiar to only one person, so that it is characteristic of the Father to beget, of the Son to be begotten, and of the Holy Spirit to proceed from both.

2. When the Deity is described within itself (intra se), persons are distinguished, and there is reserved for each person His order and His characteristic, so that the first person is the Father, the second the Son, and the third the Holy Spirit. Likewise we can distinguish what the Father is, what the Son is, and what the Holy Spirit is. Again we can note the difference

\(^{39}\)Theol. 5, Oratio 31.15, MPG 36.149.


between each and the properties of each. And again we can see what our Luther says in *The Last Words of David*, Vol. 8, Jena ed., p.165 [Amer. Ed. 15.302], where he writes, “If I do not ascribe to each Person within the Godhead, or outside and beyond creation, a special distinction not appropriate to the other two, then I have mingled the Persons into one Person. And that is ... wrong. One must distinguish the Persons within the Godhead ....”

**Useful and Necessary Observations Drawn from the Rules Which Have Been Given**

1. Regarding the external (*ad extra*) works performed with respect to creatures when only one person is mentioned, or two, or when the entire Trinity is understood: Thus in the Creed the Father is called the Creator, but not to the exclusion of the Son or the Holy Spirit. For of the Son it is said in John 1:10, “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him,” and in Heb. 1:2, “Through whom also He made the worlds.” And of the Holy Spirit it is said in Ps. 33:6, “By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made and by the Spirit of His mouth is all their power.” Gen. 1:26, “Let us make man,” speaks of all three persons in the Godhead at the same time.

Thus providence and the sustaining and conservation of things are often attributed to one person, and yet it is the common work of the whole Trinity. Concerning the Father, Christ says in Matt. 6:26 and 10:29, “A sparrow does not fall to the earth without the will of your Father.” Of the Son it is said in Heb. 1:3, “Upholding all things by the Word of His power.” And of the Holy Spirit it is said in Ps. 104:30, “Send forth Your Spirit and they will be created, and You will renew the face of the earth.”

2. Gregory of Nazianzus notes that sometimes Scripture mentions the three persons, as “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” and at other times two persons, as in the exordia of the epistles, “Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” and at still other times one person, as at the close of the Pauline epistles, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” This way of speaking at times preserves the order of the persons, as in the preceding examples, and at other times is indifferent


to the order, as when, the name of the Son is placed ahead of the name of the Father in 2 Cor: 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Likewise when the name of the Holy Spirit is placed ahead of the name of the Son, as in Eph. 3:16-17, “That you may be strengthened in the Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.” That is to say, Scripture bears witness that the three persons and the entire Trinity are the one true God, and that each person is perfectly and in all respects that one true God. For when in John 10:30 the Son says, “I and the Father are one,” He is not excluding the Holy Spirit. For in 1 John 3:24 it is said, “By the Spirit we know that the Father and the Son remain in us.” And in 1 John 5:7, “These three are one.”

3. Scripture attributes one and the same activity sometimes to the Father, sometimes to the Son, and sometimes to the Holy Spirit, in order to show that the external works are common to all, that the three persons exist at the same time and work together at the same time. In Rom. 16:25 the Father establishes, in 1 Cor. 1:8 the Son confirms, and in Eph. 3:16 the Holy Spirit strengthens. Likewise, in James 1:17 one is enlightened by the Father, in John 1:9 the Word (ho logos) enlightens every man, and in Eph. 3:7–9 the Holy Spirit enlightens all through the ministry. This observation is also by Gregory of Nazianzus.40

4. The Arians, in opposition to this position, raised 1 Tim. 6:15–16, “The Father alone has immortality, alone is powerful”; Rom. 16:27, “The Father alone is wise”; Luke 18:19, “No one is good, except God alone”; John 17:3, the Son says to the Father, “... that they may know You the only true God.” Therefore the Son is not true God, because the word “alone” is used exclusively of the Father. But the answer is truly and fundamentally based on these rules. For when the Deity is placed in opposition to idols, or to creatures, then the mention of one person does not exclude the others from being of the same substance (homoousia) with the Godhead. Nor does the mention of two exclude the third. But the exclusive aspect pertains to and is used over against only idols and creatures. Cyril makes this observation.

 Moreover, we must consider the certain and firm testimonies of Scripture on which this

40 Theol. 5, Oratio 31.3, MPG 36.136.


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correct answer relies. For the authority of Cyril does not suffice in itself. Thus when the Godhead is described internally (intra sese), then Christ clearly rejects the exclusive concept, John 8:16, 28-29; John 16:32b. Therefore it is manifest that the concept of exclusiveness which is alleged in the passages cited applies to the first rule and excludes only idols and creatures (to which it is opposed) and not the other persons of the Godhead. For Christ rejects this exclusive concept. Thus when it is said in John 17:3 that the Father is “the only true God,” the Son is not excluded, for it says in I John 5:20, “The Son is the true God,” and in John 16:15, “All things which the Father has are Mine,” and in Matt. 11:27, “No man knows the Father except the Son, and no one knows the Son except the Father.” Nor is the Holy Spirit excluded, because in 1 Cor. 2:11 it says, “The things which are of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.” And just as in Paul the Son is not excluded, so in Matthew the Holy Spirit is not excluded. Thus in Rev. 19:12, “The Son has a name which no one knows except Himself,” it is manifest that neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit are excluded, but only creatures. These last points are made by Augustine, Contra Maximin [MPL 42.743 ff.], and demonstrate the true basis for this fourth observation.

5. The church in its worship sometimes makes specific mention of the three persons, sometimes of two, and sometimes of one; and yet always it directs its prayers to the one true divine essence and at the same time to all the persons. For with respect to us the three persons are at the same time and each individually the one, true, undivided God, so that when the dove descended, one can correctly say that this is the one true God and beyond Him there is no other God, as it says in John 14:9, “He who sees Me, sees My Father also.” And again in v. 10, “I am in the Father, and the Father in Me.” On this basis we can understand how the church directs its prayers sometimes to the Father, sometimes to the Son, and sometimes to the Holy Spirit. For it believes and confesses in its prayers not only that the three persons are the one true God, but that each person is not just a part of that one divine essence but rather is the entire divine essence, that is, the one true God, than whom there is no other God. For he who invokes one person above or beyond the others, as if that person were separate or individual, errs from the true God, as it is said in John 5:23, and John 8:54-55b. This is the point which has


been made by our revered father and preceptor Dr. Martin Luther, *De Ult. Verb. Davidis*, Vol. 8, Jena ed. [Amer. Ed. 15.302–03].

6. The persons are distinguished not only by internal differences, such as that one begets, another is begotten, the third proceeds, but also by external differences which have been noted particularly by reason of revelation and beneficial actions toward the church, as is evident in the definition of each person. For in the external works (*opera ad extra*) the three persons are together and work together, and yet with a certain order and with the properties of each person preserved, as Augustine says in *Contra Felicianum*, 10 [MPL 42.1164]. Note 1 Cor. 15:57. The fathers often used the statement of Paul in Rom. 11:36, “For of Him and through Him and in Him are all things; to whom be glory and honor.” For because the apostle is speaking of external works, he mentions the one eternal essence, “To Him be honor,” not “to them.” And yet, just as there is one essence without confusion of the persons, so this essence performs the external works in common for the three persons, without confusion, but hints at the difference of the persons—“of Him, in Him, and through Him.” Therefore the external works, as our great Martin Luther sets forth, should be considered in a twofold sense. First, in the absolute sense, and thus without distinction, they are and are described as the works of the three persons in common. Second, in a relative sense, when they are considered as to the order in which the persons act, [we must consider] what the properties of each person are and what each person does in an immediate sense. Thus we must consider the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification in both the absolute and the relative sense.

And in some way on the basis of this we can consider why sometimes only one person is mentioned, or why two, when the entire Trinity is understood. For example, “The Father, the fount of blessing,” as the ancients say, and He is called the only Potentate, etc. Likewise, “The Creator Father and the Son breathe the Holy Spirit into the hearts of the believers.” Hence it is said in John 14:23, “I and the Father will come and make our abode with him.” And in 1 John 3:24, “We know from the Spirit that the Father and the Son are in us.”

In summary, just as we believe in the unity of the essence and yet must not permit a confusion of the persons, so we must understand also this rule: the external works are common to


the three persons, but in such a way that the differences and properties of the persons are not confused.

All antiquity frequently made use of this observation in arriving at solutions of problems. But in worship this observation is absolutely necessary: for although the worship of the Deity is undivided, just as the external works are, yet the prayer of the church is especially for this reason separated from the prayer and worship of all other gentiles. For the church invokes the three persons without confusion, but takes into consideration the distinction and blessings peculiar to each of the persons.

7. Of the names applied to the Deity some refer to the essence and some to the person. And between these categories there is a great difference, for example, the Father is God, eternal, omnipotent. Likewise the Son is God, eternal, omnipotent. The Holy Spirit is God, eternal, omnipotent. But we do not say there are three Gods, three eternals, three omnipotents, because these designations apply to the essence. And Augustine says, “So great is the power of each substance in the Trinity that what is said elsewhere concerning the individual persons (e.g., God is eternal, omnipotent), this, when referring to the whole, is not said in the plural but in the singular.” Erasmus ridicules Athanasius because he does not wish to speak of three eternals, although he himself goes right on to say that the three persons are coeternal. But from these rules and fundamentals it must be understood how God-pleasing and useful is this care in speaking.

Next we must observe this point, that the same designation can sometimes be applied to the essence and sometimes to the person. In accepting this concept there is no diminishing of the distinction. For example, the Son is not the Father, even if the term “Father” is used with reference to the persons of the Son. For example, in Is. 9:6 the Son is called the “Father of the world to come” (Vulgate). The name “Father” is used with reference to the essence. And in the sequence for Trinity Sunday the church calls the Holy Spirit the “Father of the poor.” Thus the Son is not the Holy Spirit when the term “spirit” is used with personal reference to Him. But because God is a spirit in essence, the Father is also spirit and the Son is spirit. Thus, these names refer to the essence: “The Father of mercies,” 2 Cor: 1:3; “the Father of spirits,” Heb.


12:9. So also in the Nicene Creed the terms are used in the personal sense, “God of God, Light of light,” etc. And in the Lord’s Prayer the term “Father” can be taken in the essential sense, because He is the antithesis to the creature and the prayer is directed to the entire Trinity. However, the term can also be taken in the personal sense in consideration of the benefits belonging to each of the persons, in accord with the statements of Paul in Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6, “He sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying Abba, Father.” We worship in spirit, John 4:23–24, and we call the first person the Father, because of the Son. And this conforms more closely to the apostolic form of the words.

Perhaps many more examples can be piled up which have been discussed among the scholastics, but I wanted to select those which are most notable and which will commend themselves very well to this usage.

But do not get the notion that these observations are foolish subtleties. But because God wills to be known, invoked, and proclaimed as He has revealed Himself, therefore we must make every effort to believe in a godly way concerning these great mysteries and speak reverently and soberly about them. And in this matter, we must imitate the diligence of the ancients by whom the truth of this article was fought for and defended in the face of heretics. For as Jerome says, “Heresy arises from the improper use of words.”

We can achieve this goal more easily if we keep these rules of the ancients before our eyes and have them in view when we speak about this article in a pious, reverent, and proper way.
